NEW YORK ... 1961

How Much Should The Public Know?

By David Wise
Herald Tribune White House Correspondent

WASHINGTON.

IN THE wake of the shock of the Cuban disaster some of the larger implications are beginning to be debated here. The shape of the debate is still fuzzy and its tone has been muted by the bipartisan instinct to join together in a time of national trouble.

Nevertheless, the lines of the discussion, if blurred, all seem to point to this central question:

¶ To what extent is the democratic process weakened when the United States government—as in the case of the Cuban invasion—organizes a major foreign policy operation without giving the public advance notice and opportunity to debate the issues?

Since the invasion of Cuba by rebels armed, trained and supported by the United States Central Intelligence Agency carried with it the risk of involving this country in a small, or larger, war, the question is not an idle, nor a theoretical one.

Under the American system of government, the electorate can voice its approval or disapproval of the Administration once every four years. It cannot be expected, nor would it be desirable, that every move of a President be disclosed and debated in advance publicly.

• • •

Nevertheless, the right of the electorate to make its will felt on major policy issues at least once in four years was almost meaningless in the case of the Cuban paramilitary operation.

The Cuban invasion was conceived by the Eisenhower administration and executed by the Kennedy administration. A great national election intervened while all this was going on—but how many who voted on Nov. 8 anticipated the invasion that took place five months later?

True, Cuba became a major issue in the Presidential election campaign, but the debate between Mr. Kennedy and the then Vice-President Nixon rings suspiciously hollow—on both sides—in the light of recent events. The assumption can be made that both men knew more about what was going on in the swamps of Florida, Louisiana and Guatemala than they told the American public in the great debate over Cuba last fall.

Obviously, in a world in which the iron Communist dictatorship based in Moscow will not play by the rules, there are increasing pressures upon Washington to play dirty, with cloak, dagger and every other weapon at its command.

But the counter-question which is posed is this: If a major foreign policy action—carrying with it the risk of war—must be prepared in secret, then should it be undertaken at all?

And a corollary question being asked is how far down the road a democracy can go in emulating the tactics of its enemies before it wakes up one morning and finds it is no longer very different from its foe?

• • •

President Kennedy has himself helped to focus attention on some of these larger questions by his speech to the publishers in New York, urging that news be judged against the yardstick of whether it is in the "national interest" before it is printed.

The implication is that newspapers should not have run any stories about rebel training camps in advance of the invasion. Actually, only a handful of such stories appeared, in widely scattered publications. The invasion, and United States involvement in it, came as a surprise to the vast majority of the American public, despite the trickle of stories hinting at rebel preparations.

The question now being asked by members of the Washington press corps is whether it would have been in the broader "national interest" had the press really uncovered and told to the nation the story of the preparation for the invasion.

Once the invasion was launched, Washington imposed a tight news blackout on its progress. As a result, reporters had to rely on the wild claims of rebel press agents for information. The size of the invasion force was greatly exaggerated, and in turn this made the defeat, when it came, seem even greater than it was.

Not until Thursday afternoon, when most of the men on the beachhead at Cochinas were already captured or dead, did the Kennedy administration begin to call in newsmen for background sessions—and these were confusing, conflicting and incomplete.

• • •

One hundred and eighty-five years ago the men who signed the Declaration of Independence explained that "to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed." Perhaps the rebel assault would have had the overwhelming advance support of the American people—had they known about it. As it is, the invasion of Cuba by forces organized by the United States government was undertaken without the consent of the governed.

And this is what lies at the heart of the debate now being heard in Washington.